

TERROR TRACKER: al-Baghdadi's Media Appearance — Where ISIS is Headed?

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Introduction

On April 29, the media wing of the trans-national Sunni jihadi militant group, *Islamic State (IS)* released a video of its 'Caliph', Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi under the title, '*In the Hospitality of Amirul- Muiminin*'. This event remains highly notable given the rarity of the militant group leader's media address. It also happens to be only the second such address since announcing the Caliphate from Mosul in 2014.



Image Attribute: IS linked media announces its global operation: Battle of Vengeance for blessed Sham Wilayah

This report analyses the significance of the timing, potential rationale as well as seeks to answer the 'what next' with regards to this militant group.

The Prelude

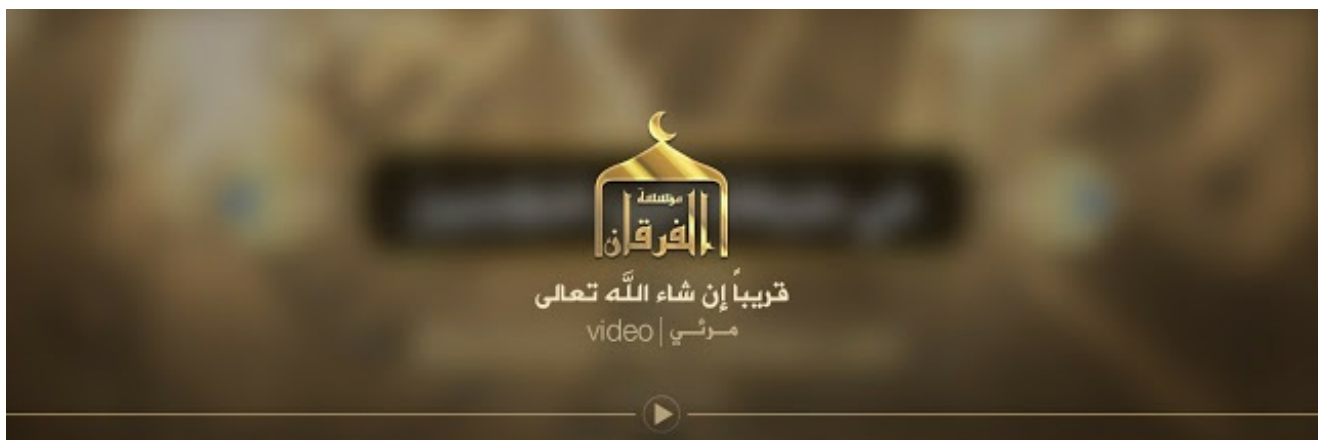


Image Attribute: Al Furqan media's announcement prior to the release of the Baghdadi's address

The media address of Baghdadi was preceded by an announcement of an unspecified-upcoming video by the al Furqan media agency linked to IS. The message of an 'upcoming video' which remained classified until the latest release was proliferated in a host of languages. In the meanwhile, IS-linked agency, Bank Al-Ansar also had initiated its campaign of development of fake social media accounts, which it has been persistently urging its followers to make use of while adopting certain precautionary measures alongside. This resulted in the group releasing a host of accounts in the days leading up to the aforementioned video release of Baghdadi. The operational status of these remains unverified at the time of writing.

Why Now?

The timing of the release remains highly critical especially as it comes in the backdrop of the collapse of the last IS territorial stronghold of Baghouz in eastern Syria's *Deir ez-Zor*, along the Iraq - Syria border. Moreover, the announcement of '*Battle of Vengeance for blessed Sham Wilayah*', is IS's first global operation announced after the loss of Baghouz on March 23. Consequently, the release is understood to be the leadership's attempt to establish the outfit's continued relevance despite lack of territory in contemporary time.

Acceptance of pledge of allegiance from Mali and Burkina Faso could also have been a potential trigger for the release. Furthermore, the media address is likely aimed at capitalizing on the global attention the group received recently, especially after the successful execution of unprecedented attacks like those in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, it also lays to rest all unconfirmed claims of the death of the '*Caliph*' amidst the prolonged and extensive security operations launched in Iraq and Syria. The timing thus remains critical. Though Baghdadi by himself may not have been coordinating operations on the ground, the assurance of his survival is expected to provide a great morale booster for the fighters as well as the supporters of this militant group. It is also instrumental in fueling the 'well oiled' propaganda machinery which has managed to survive the security operations as well as a crackdown on social media channels aimed at curbing the group's outreach mechanism.



Image Attribute: IS threats to potential deserters and allegiance switching fighters

Additionally, the timing remains notable in the backdrop of reports of some of the former IS fighters switching allegiance to *al Qaeda* (AQ) and its affiliates as was witnessed in Syria's Idlib province, when at least some IS fighters and fringe elements reportedly joined the AQ affiliate Hurras ad-Din. While allegiance pattern of many fighters in a complex battlefield like Syria though is a regular occurrence, the leadership likely has taken the threat posed by AQ propaganda machinery more seriously. This is in the backdrop of the latter's media campaign which is more focused on reviving and recovering its operations as well as resources from amongst these fringe elements.

Moreover, the territory and the resources dedicated to administering it gave the militant group some 'legitimacy' amongst the people it governed. Evidently, it also was a source of liability and vulnerability for the group. In the absence of the above, coupled with what can be assumed as a significant resource pool, IS gets the leeway to plan and execute more attacks through a highly decentralized channel of operations as was witnessed in case of Sri Lanka.

Finally, the report comes in the days leading up to the holy month of Ramadan which has previously witnessed some high-profile attacks globally. While there is no established pattern of an uptick in attacks during this month specifically, coupled with the absence of the mention of Ramadan throughout Baghdadi's speech, the timing of the onset of Ramadan and the video release hints towards a potential tacit connect.

What Does it Symbolise?

Closer scrutiny of the video indicates that like all its previously released high profile videos, the latest release has been highly choreographed to maximize its impact. The presence of what can be assessed as close leadership alongside Baghdadi is indicative of the fact that a sizable number of the core leadership continues to evade arrest as well as survive targeted attacks by security agencies. This can be expected to facilitate the 'operational continuity' the group seeks to achieve over the coming months.

Additionally, it follows a new '*Dawa series*' of speeches by AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri announced on April 19-20, aimed at extending its outreach to radicalized elements especially in the backdrop of the winding up of the '*Territorial Caliphate*'. However, given the perceived 'lackluster- generic performance' as compared to Baghdadi's relatively more focused and operational presentation of agendas indicates of a more '*hands-on*' agenda which is expected to appeal its followers. Moreover, the operational confinement of AQ to areas in Yemen, Syria, and parts of Africa as opposed to IS's recent global 'accomplishments' gives the latter a significant propaganda 'leap' over AQ. This, at least in the short run is expected to stem the potential and actual attrition as mentioned in the preceding section.

Finally, mention of Wilayah Somalia, Yemen, *Qawqaz (Caucasus)* and Turkey in the video is indicative of the group's continued agenda to consolidate and strengthen an operational presence in these aforementioned regions. It is not able to know that currently, the group has faced some serious opposition from not only the security agencies in these regions but also its jihadi nemesis, AQ.

What to Expect?



Image Attribute: IS claim of Dhaka IED attack on April 29, 2019.

In terms of Modus Operandi, IS claimed the April 29 Dhaka IED attack as well as the Kalmunai incident in eastern Sri Lanka on April 28 in which suspected pro-IS militants detonated their explosives amidst a security operation to evade arrest during the overnight hours of April 26-27. The incident was the second claimed IS attack on the island nation in

less than a week. Previously, on April 21, the group claimed a foiled militant attack in Zulfi town in the north of Riyadh, potentially aimed at highlighting its continued operational capabilities in the Kingdom despite a host of security operations against the jihadi group.

All combined, it is indicative of the fact that the group is expected to continue to claim/ adopt low intensity/ unsophisticated attacks as was evident in the aforementioned cases. While smaller attacks are expected to give the militant group an operational continuity, the larger more sophisticated operations like the **Sri Lanka attacks** are likely to fuel its propaganda machinery which will aid its survival and sustenance. It also is indicative of the group's operational capabilities and 'acumen' at a global scale.

Furthermore, the acknowledgment of certain prominent individual fighters killed in the Battle of Baghouz including Fabien and Jean- Michel Clain as well as perpetrators of the Sri Lanka attacks, are likely aimed at plugging potential gaps between the leadership and operatives on the ground. This is likely to serve as a major morale booster for the latter. The effects of the same are expected to be witnessed on the ground during subsequent attacks over the coming months.

This terror tracker report is provided by **GRID91**, a security risk management company.



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